Congress: Bilingualism Is Not a Handicap

By Claude Goldenberg

A federal appeals court decision last month to side with Arizona’s all-English approach to educating English-language learners at first blush appears to be a setback only for those who advocate bilingual education for these students. But, in reality, it’s a setback for all of us. While employers are clamoring for bilingual or even multilingual employees for an increasingly globalized economy, U.S. schools turn out relatively few students who are even somewhat competent in a second language. Hard figures are unavailable, but we know that only 5 percent of the 4.2 million Advanced Placement exams given in 2014 were in a foreign language, and only slightly more than half these students scored a 4 or a 5. That’s about 100,000 students—about six-tenths of 1 percent of the country’s nearly 16 million high school students. Most egregiously, instead of maintaining and building on the home-language abilities of 11 million students in our public schools, we actually attempt to quash them, if only by neglect.

A University of Phoenix Research Institute survey, reported in The Wall Street Journal, found increasing demand among prospective employers for workers who speak foreign languages, particularly Chinese and Spanish. A New York City executive coach noted, “It’s easier to find [bilingual candidates] jobs, and they often get paid more.” Academic research tends to bear this out: In addition to the University of Phoenix findings, fluent bilingualism has been associated with lower likelihood of dropping out of high school and higher probability of having a higher status job with higher earnings. Conversely, monolingualism may have costs: A lack of proficiency in one’s primary language was found to be associated with annual income losses between $2,100 and $3,300.

Arizona is making a bad situation worse. It is one of three states—the others being California and Massachusetts—that enacted policies severely limiting the use of students’ home languages. They did so in the belief that adopting the policy would greatly accelerate English acquisition and academic achievement for English-learners. This assumption is perhaps understandable, but studies have shown it is mistaken: Full-on English immersion for students with limited English proficiency does not, in the long run, accelerate their English acquisition and academic achievement.

Results of home-language restrictions in these three states have not been very encouraging. In Arizona, the reading achievement gap between English-learners and non-English-learners has increased by about 1.5 grade levels for 4th and 8th graders. In California, the gap has increased almost as dramatically in 8th grade and slightly in 4th. In Massachusetts, the achievement gap has increased somewhat at both grade levels.

In the country as a whole, however, where bilingual education generally remains an option for English-learners, the reading achievement gap has decreased by nearly a grade level in 4th grade and slightly in 8th grade.

To be fair, it’s difficult to draw firm conclusions based on such state-level data, since policies vary in many ways. Yet one thing is clear: Educational policies that restrict use of students’ home languages are no silver bullet. They might even do more harm than good.

Aside from its economic benefits, bilingualism has also been linked to a number of positive cognitive outcomes, such as increased control over attention, abstract- and symbolic-representation skills, and delayed onset of Alzheimer’s. Bilingualism also has positive social outcomes, such as improved intergroup relations and increased cross-ethnic friendships for students in bilingual programs.
There is a common misconception that bilingual education is only for the almost 5 million public school students who are limited in their English proficiency. But bilingualism provides enrichment and increased opportunity for everyone. In addition, thanks to a phenomenon called “transfer,” what is learned in one language is also known in a second one; so learning something in your first language ultimately benefits your achievement in both.

Countries around the world, such as Canada, Finland, and Sweden, have demonstrated that children can learn their own and a second language and turn out academically and linguistically competent in both. Far from being a problem, bilingualism is an asset both to individuals and to society.

Now, as Congress grapples with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, it should seize the opportunity to revive an American tradition most people don’t even know exists: our country’s bilingual legacy. Bilingual education has been a part of the American educational landscape since before the United States emerged from 13 fractious colonies, first appearing among 17th-century Polish settlers in the Virginia colony. Bilingual education has existed in some form to the present day, with an interruption only during and after World War I, because of anti-Germanism and nativist opposition to languages other than English.

There have been German bilingual schools in Pennsylvania and Oregon; Scandinavian-language schools in Minnesota and the Dakotas; Dutch in Michigan; Czech in Texas and Nebraska; Italian and Polish in Wisconsin; French in Louisiana and the Northeast; and Spanish in the Southwest and, more recently, in Florida and the Northeast.

There is hopeful evidence of a growing awareness of bilingualism’s value and bilingual education’s benefits. English-speaking parents in districts from Oregon to the Washington, D.C., suburbs are supporting bilingual programs to give their own children advantages bilingualism provides. According to the Center for Applied Linguistics, the United States now has nearly 1,000 “immersion” programs, whose students are expected to become bilingual and biliterate. The “seal of biliteracy” is granted to thousands of graduating high school seniors who demonstrate at least some level of second-language proficiency.

In its reauthorization of the ESEA, Congress should build on this momentum by including provisions and authorizing funding to encourage states and localities to develop and implement bilingual instruction for all students. Such provisions were part of the federal legislation in the 1960s, but were eliminated under the current version of the ESEA, the No Child Left Behind Act. Federal legislation cannot and should not attempt to impose bilingual education, of course. But it can help recapture an American tradition that we risk losing, to everyone’s detriment.

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